

The Half-Penny Is Hard At Work For Miami-Dade September 2003

On November 5, 2003, Miami-Dade's Office of Public Transportation Management (OPTM) will celebrate the one year anniversary of the half-penny transit surtax, known as the People's Transportation Plan (PTP). Approved by a margin of more than two to one by Miami-Dade voters, the PTP is an innovative traffic relief plan in which the County commits to using the half penny proceeds towards adding more buses and routes, improving service, expanding rapid transit and creating thousands of transit and construction related jobs. Almost one year into the PTP, public transportation in Miami-Dade County has and continues to undergo a significant expansion of transit services and infrastructure, thanks to this dedicated funding source.

Many improvements have been made to Miami-Dade County's bus and rail service. Since November 5, the OPTM has implemented the Golden Passport program, which provides free public transportation to all senior citizens 65 years of age and older and to those who receive Social Security benefits, 24-hour Metrorail service, free Metromover service for all in downtown Miami, 24-hour Metrobus service on 21 routes, 7 new bus routes, the execution of over 358,000 additional hours of bus service and the implementation of 4,500,000 additional bus service miles. Bus service improvements are scheduled to continue with six new routes planned for fiscal year 2003-04, along with significant improvements to forty existing routes. Included in these improvements are reduced wait times, route extensions, service expansion, and to fulfill these improvements, over 230 new bus operators have been hired and 100 full size buses and 70 mini-buses have been ordered. Noteworthy to mention, the service improvements that have been made to the public transportation system did not require a fare increase. As a matter of fact, the public has not seen an increase in its \$1.25 boarding fare in over ten years.

Although public transportation service improvements are what most associate with the PTP, its legislative and business side is equally impressive. The PTP is steadily advancing transit conditions in the community, in part due to the fact that it is enabling Miami-Dade County to compete for more state and federal funds to improve its mass transit services. To date, the OPTM has received more than \$17 million in state and federal funds for transit programs, such as the Bird Road MAX, the WAGES Welfare to Work program, and for the enhancement of security measures throughout Miami-Dade Transit.

This summer, OPTM and the Citizens' Independent Transportation Trust (CITT), the watchdog group over the PTP's half penny surtax, made great strides in preparing and expanding access to public transportation for county residents. With more than twenty meetings this summer, the CITT is steadily advancing several resolutions to the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) of Miami-Dade. Most notably, they reviewed and forwarded the Municipal Interlocal Agreement forms and amendments to the BCC. In August, the OPTM completed the first ever transfer of transit surtax proceeds, approximately 30 percent of the \$30 million that will be distributed to Miami-Dade's 33 municipalities in the first year under the PTP.

Also, this summer and after nearly two decades without new major transit construction, Miami-Dade inaugurated the Palmetto Metrorail Station and its extension which broke ground in 1999. During that same week, the OPTM received notification from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) of a "Recommended" rating for Miami-Dade's North Corridor Metrorail Extension Project.

This ambitious and significant project, which will now become a main artery of Miami-Dade's public transportation system, at one point was thought to be a pipedream rather than a pipeline. Last year, the Miami-Dade submitted the North Corridor Metrorail Extension Project for review by the FTA. After careful study, the project was given a "Not-Recommended" rating due to a lack of committed funds by the County. After November 5, with the creation of the half-penny dedicated source of funding for improvements to public transportation, the County revised and re-submitted the North Corridor Metrorail Extension Project for reevaluation. In March 2003, the OPTM submitted a revised financial plan and project proposal to the FTA. It included the new funding

and conditions of the passage of the PTP, which is stipulated for New Starts by the Federal Government. Two months later the FTA delivered a "Recommended" rating and affirmed that the OPTM has the financial capacity to build and operate the North Corridor Metrorail Extension.

The North Corridor Metrorail Extension Project is a proposed 12.6 mile Metrorail extension that will provide a direct link between the Miami-Dade/Broward county line, as well as the top three employment locations in Miami-Dade County. Along the corridor, eight new Metrorail stations are to be built with a total of five park and ride facilities, providing approximately 2650 parking spaces. The total cost of the North Corridor Metrorail Extension Project is \$1.054 billion with 50 percent funded by the Federal Section 5309 New Starts. Existing and committed funding comes from a state Public Transit Block Grant and the one-half cent sales tax local match, each providing a 25 percent. The projected start date for the North Corridor Extension Project is November 2006, with an expected opening in April 2010. The OPTM's Public Affairs Section is currently working with the Citizens' Advisory Committee (comprised of local residents) on finalizing the corridor's alignment.

This is the first of six Metrorail projects slated to be submitted for rating by the FTA, a crucial step in locking in Federal funding. The FTA states that "project evaluation is an ongoing process" which means the OPTM must continue to meet the goals of and wisely appropriate the funds of the PTP. The North Corridor Metrorail Extension Project is the first major case study provided by the PTP that proves the significance of a dedicated funding source, which without one, endangers the financial stability of future Metrorail projects.

The PTP's work is far from over; these months prior to the one year anniversary of the People's Transportation Plan are a challenging time for Miami-Dade County. As the OPTM continues to prepare its lobbying efforts for federal and state appropriations and legislative action for its rail projects, bus and rail improvements will continue to be delivered to Miami-Dade residents.